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Questioning Bush's policies is NOT unpatriotic

A former U.S. senator finds that trying to make up his own mind about Iraq can be politically dangerous

By James G. Abourezk -- Global Beat Syndicate

SIOUX FALLS, SD – We have arrived at a scary and dangerous state in this country since the attacks of September 11, not only because of the threat of terrorists, but because people opposed to the policies of the Bush administration are being charged with being unpatriotic. It is not a sign of true patriotism to unthinkingly fall in line behind a president desperate to take us to war with Iraq – rather we are obliged to raise the kinds of questions that save blood and treasure and preserve our national morality and global reputation.

I went to Baghdad in September as part of a delegation that included Congressman Nick Rahall (D-WVa) on a trip aimed at preventing the aggressive war President Bush has been aching to wage against the Iraqis. We also wanted to investigate the impact of the long sanctions against Iraq on the health and nutritional condition of the Iraqi people.

Most of all, we wanted to convince the Iraqi government that George W. Bush was not joking about attacking Iraq if Baghdad did not allow weapons inspectors back into the country. We met with Deputy Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and with Saadoun Hammadi, speaker of the Iraqi parliament. I had known both men in earlier times. Hammadi was foreign minister when I was a member of the U.S. Senate. I first met Aziz in 1988, when I was a lawyer in private practice representing a client who had business in Iraq. In our September meeting I told both men that to avoid an aggressive U.S. military strike, Iraq had to remove any excuse for such attack. Happily, two days after we left, the Iraqi government announced that it would re-admit the inspectors, despite Baghdad's concern that members of the last inspection team had spied for the United States and Israel.

We believed then – and still believe – that we were performing a public service by trying to avoid a war. But now, Congressman Rahall and others who are opposed to invading Iraq are being called unpatriotic. It is a form of modern-day McCarthyism.

The issue of who is patriotic and who is not deserves thoughtful

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examination. While he was in Iraq trying to prevent a war, Congressman Rahall was called a traitor by his Republican opponent in West Virginia – and this is only one example of widespread efforts to silence opponents of Bush's Iraq policy. Those wanting a war use the technique of calling into question the patriotism of those who oppose it.

Rather than encouraging debate on the issue, President Bush and his supporters are using fear and name-calling to beat their opponents over the head. He has said repeatedly that Saddam Hussein's Iraq is a direct threat to the United States. Sadly, he is telling the country a bald-faced lie. According to statements by his own administration, Iraq does not have nuclear weapons. Even if it did, it has no long-range bombers or missiles capable of reaching the United States. And, as Tariq Aziz said during my conversation with him, "If we were to provide anti-American terrorists with any kind of weapons, America would destroy us in a minute. We are not that foolish." Saddam Hussein is known to be homicidal, has killed thousands of his own people, but no one ever accused him of being suicidal, which he surely would be if he hinted at attacking the United States.

More significantly, a U.S. aggressive war on Iraq would implode and destabilize the Middle East. It would cause a devastating upward spike in oil prices, which in turn would tumble our economy into a recession – something we do not need on top of our current economic downslide. Such a war would expose our troops to unknown dangers, the least of which would be house-to-house fighting in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. And certainly, thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians will die from the heavy U.S. bombing attacks needed to reduce American casualties. Are we willing to have that innocent blood on our hands? And for what purpose?

Also, what effect will an American first strike have on the U.N. Charter that states categorically that no nation should attack another, except in self defense? The answer is obvious, it will destroy the United Nations. What effect will our actions have on India and Pakistan, who are looking for any excuse to attack each other with nuclear weapons? Or on China vis a vis Taiwan? Or on any other country that has ambitions to expand?

The question of patriotism should not be aimed at those who oppose the aggressive devastation of a small third world country, but at those in the Bush administration who seem to delight in the prospect of the annihilation of innocent Iraqi civilians. Their plan will devastate our own economy and destroy the moral values by which we have lived since the founding of this country.

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